

AMBER Alert

Best Practices Guide for Public Information Officers



*Bringing Abducted
Children Home*



**AMBER
ALERT**

America's Missing:
Broadcast Emergency Response

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The success of an AMBER Alert is often measured by how quickly and timely a public Alert can be issued. Research has shown that when citizens are aware a reliable mechanism exists to help locate abducted children, and when they view their role as both worthy and effective, they willingly serve as thousands of additional eyes and ears on behalf of law enforcement (Burns and Crawford, 1999; Zgoba, 2004; Rothe and Muzzatti, 2004).

Additional research has shown that among missing child cases ending in homicide, the murder usually occurs within the first three hours following the abduction (Hanfland, Keppel, and Weis, 1997). The AMBER Alert program works because citizens know what to look for, who to contact, and what is at stake. AMBER Alert provides both a dependable method for helping law enforcement locate an abducted child and a program goal that is widely perceived as both worthwhile and noble. Quite simply, AMBER Alert is a model program for the public.

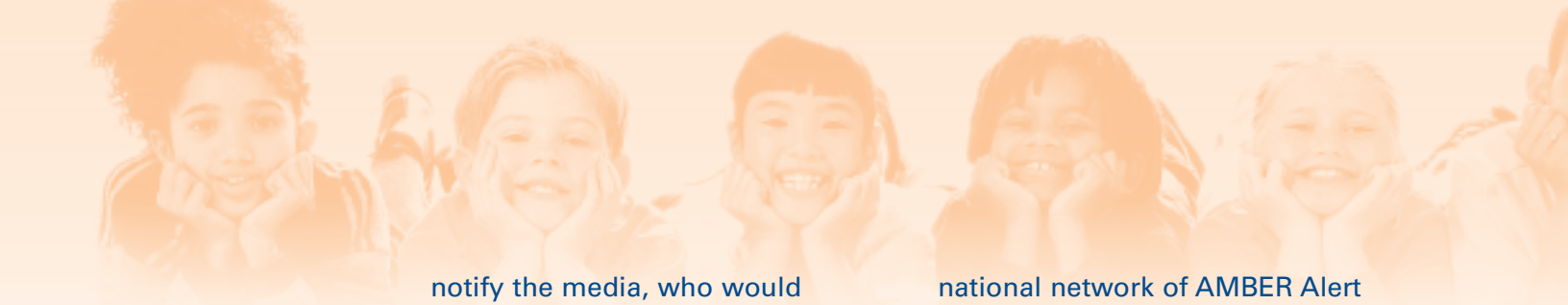
AMBER Alert systems work best when all component agencies/ organizations function in a smooth and consistent manner. The effectiveness of the law enforcement agency's public information operations will be enhanced by strong leadership and direction based on clear departmental policies and procedures.

Brief History of AMBER Alert



The idea for an early warning system was conceived in 1996 as a memorial to nine-year-old Amber Hagerman, who was kidnapped while riding her bicycle in Arlington, Texas, and later brutally murdered. Dallas area broadcasters came up with the idea of using Emergency Alert System (EAS) equipment to rapidly relay child abduction information. Broadcasters approached local law enforcement with the concept, and America's first AMBER Alert program was born. The idea was simple: Law enforcement, media, and transportation formed a network to inform the public of a child abduction. The public information officer (PIO) would be the communication cornerstone of this network. When police had confirmed that a child abduction had taken place, the department's PIO would

The public information officer (PIO) should be the primary point of contact for the media. This means that the PIO should be responsible for conveying all information from the law enforcement agency to the public via the media and for fielding inquiries from journalists and the public.



notify the media, who would broadcast announcements with as much information as possible. These announcements would enable viewers and the listening public to provide the extra eyes and ears that could increase the likelihood that a child abductor would be caught before those first three critical hours had elapsed.

The early warning concept, now called AMBER (America's Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response) Alert, quickly spread to other communities and states. Some of these programs are very sophisticated, while others are still in development. In 2002, President George W. Bush directed the U.S. Department of Justice to help every state set up its own AMBER plan. This *Best Practices Guide for Public Information Officers* is designed to help state, regional, and local programs develop and improve their plans and to promote consistency across all programs.

This guide is based on hours of research, correspondence, and discussion with state, regional, and local AMBER Alert coordinators and their PIOs, who talked openly about their experiences and volunteered the content of their plans so others could benefit. It presents the wisdom of coordinators working on the frontline of the AMBER Alert programs, who understand that no two communities or AMBER programs are exactly alike but whose goal is nevertheless the same: to create a


national network of AMBER Alert plans that will work together for the safety of the children.

The PIO's Role in an AMBER Alert

The PIO's primary function during an AMBER Alert is to convey accurate and timely information from the law enforcement agency to the public via the media. Law enforcement chief executives and supervisors are tasked with running the overall AMBER Alert operation and do not have time to field inquiries from the media or the public. Similarly, public inquiries should be directed to the PIO and away from police dispatchers, whose duties do not include disseminating information.

A law enforcement agency's PIO performs the following essential functions in the AMBER Alert program:

- ◆ Alerting the public via the media to be on the lookout for a missing child.
- ◆ Enhancing media coverage of the missing child incident by providing photographs, videos, and other visual aids to help identify the victim(s) and/or suspect(s).
- ◆ Ensuring that the story stays alive by providing regular



updates with accurate and timely information.

- ◆ Directing media and public inquiries to their proper destinations.
- ◆ Gauging public opinions and media perceptions for the agency.
- ◆ Anticipating possible worst-case scenarios and preparing the agency's response to the types of questions likely to accompany such scenarios.
- ◆ Providing family members and friends with effective strategies for conducting media interviews and press conferences, safeguarding investigatory details of the case, and protecting the family's privacy.
- ◆ Participating in post-Alert evaluations to improve systems and procedures.

No law enforcement agency should be without a PIO during this critical time of need for public and media assistance. In the early stages of an AMBER Alert, the PIO's presence will be particularly prominent. That is when press conferences, media interviews, and similar events will keep the PIO's name and face in the public eye.


After the Alert has been deactivated and the emphasis shifted to the ensuing criminal investigation,

The PIO will be a key point of contact until the AMBER Alert incident is no longer a news item.

the PIO will play a less visible but no less important role. Job responsibilities will evolve with each new change in circumstances, and the PIO can reasonably expect to take on additional duties once the public warning phase has ended.

This guide describes the PIO's job responsibilities and provides tips to maximize the PIO's effectiveness before, during, and after an AMBER Alert activation. It offers recommendations for helping law enforcement agencies achieve a smooth, rapid public warning activation program. This guide is not meant to usurp or undermine an agency's established policies and procedures governing the PIO's role in working with the media during an AMBER Alert activation. Rather, its purpose is to underscore the value of the PIO as an integral member of the public warning network, one who will be most helpful to the AMBER Alert team when he or she has been a key member from the outset.

The department's chief executive officer (CEO) must have confidence in the PIO, and the PIO must be able to function with the CEO's authority. An AMBER Alert activation does not allow the



luxury of time to determine a line of authority between the chief and supporting personnel such as first responders and case supervisors.

Ideally, the PIO should be involved in an AMBER Alert activation from the very beginning. Attempts by the PIO to catch up or get up to speed on the events leading up to an AMBER Alert or that happen during an Alert will be time consuming and counter-productive. The best way to ensure the PIO is included in all facets of the AMBER Alert process is to define the PIO's responsibilities clearly in the law enforcement agency's policies and procedures.

Every law enforcement agency should establish and regularly update its policies and procedures. The procedures for AMBER Alerts should clearly identify steps for the PIO to follow. For example:

- ◆ When and how to notify the media that an Alert has been issued.
- ◆ How to handle or where to direct inquiries from the media.
- ◆ How to handle or where to direct inquiries from the public.

The agency's procedures will likely need to be revised following an AMBER Alert incident, when the AMBER Alert team evaluates the effectiveness of the total incident response and makes

recommendations for improving its AMBER plan.

The PIO's specific duties during an AMBER Alert activation may vary among agencies, but are likely to be similar in the following key ways:

- ◆ The PIO either assists in or is immediately made aware of the decision to activate or deactivate an AMBER Alert.
- ◆ The PIO is considered an essential member of the agency's incident management structure before, during, and after an AMBER Alert so that he or she understands all aspects of the operation.
- ◆ The PIO continues to be part of the incident management structure after an AMBER Alert has been deactivated.

Choosing a PIO

Ideally, the PIO should work full time for the law enforcement agency and have expertise in the process of releasing information to the public through the media. However, smaller agencies may not have that option. Some smaller agencies have to share a PIO, while others designate a municipal or county employee to perform that function. Some agencies hire an independent contractor to serve as the PIO.



If a law enforcement agency has a small force with no full-time PIO position, the agency could designate one key officer in advance to handle AMBER Alert responsibilities once an Alert has been activated. The designated PIO should then be trained so that he or she can be effective in dealing with both the media and the public during a public warning activity.

The PIO must be under the control of the chief or sheriff and must fully understand the intricate process of releasing information. In addition, the PIO must have access to information, key agency personnel (including the chief or sheriff), the crime scene area, and other areas where information may be generated.

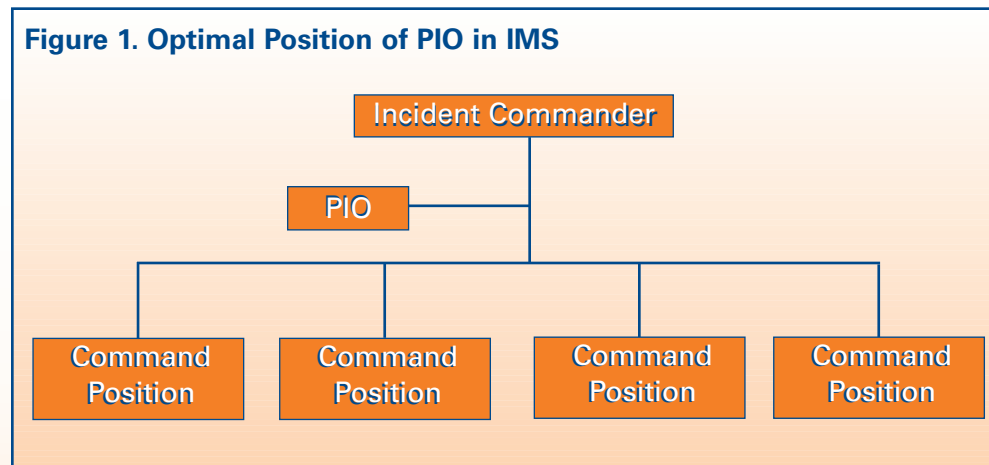
Once a primary PIO has been appointed, it may be useful to identify a backup PIO to assist or fill in when the primary PIO is absent. The PIO may wish to designate points of contact for specific information, but only the PIO should make this decision. In any case,

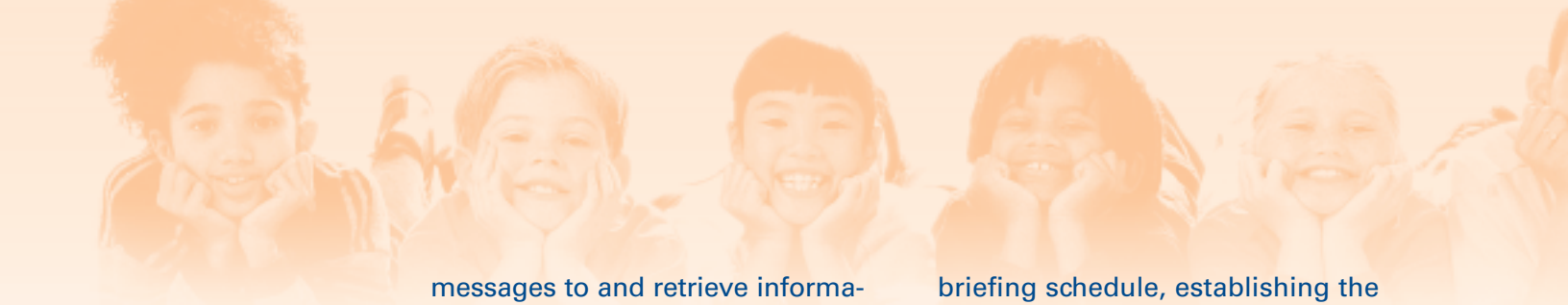
the primary designated point of contact—the PIO—should remain the same.

Structuring the Incident Management System

The Incident Management System (IMS) represents National Incident Management System protocol as required by statutory regulations of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The PIO should be strategically placed within the IMS so that he or she has direct access to all law enforcement personnel in command of the operation. Access to information is essential for the PIO to establish a smooth flow of information to the public and monitor how well the media are disseminating details about the Alert.

The structure of the IMS should allow the PIO to make immediate contact with command personnel and, at the same time, to deliver





messages to and retrieve information from personnel within the overall operational response structure. Figure 1 shows the optimal position of the PIO within the IMS. This management structure gives the PIO access to the IMS commander and to the individual command officers who work with all investigative aspects of the AMBER Alert. Traditional command hierarchical structures incorporate the PIO into the key deliberative and decisionmaking bodies within the law enforcement agency. A PIO who has access to key decision-making processes will be in the best possible position to ensure that only responsible messages that will effectively inform the public about law enforcement's search for a missing child are delivered to the media.

Organizing Media Briefings

The PIO should be responsible for all logistics involving media briefings, including creating the

briefing schedule, establishing the location of the briefings (away from the command center if possible), and securing parking for media vehicles. In addition, the PIO should do the following:

- ◆ Choose a location for the briefing area that will meet the needs of both investigators and the media. The PIO should consider parking lots and other public areas rather than law enforcement headquarters.
- ◆ Set the tone for the media briefing. He or she should also remain in control of the entire briefing and of the briefing environment (e.g., where it takes place, participants' roles, structure of briefing).
- ◆ Consider creating a pool arrangement with the media, if necessary.
- ◆ Alert the media if the briefing will be broadcast as a live television news conference.

Getting a Grip on Technology

New developments in technology will affect the dissemination of information to and the retrieval of information from the public. All PIOs should be able to use current technologies such as faxes, digital scanners and cameras, e-mail communications, and Web sites. PIOs also should keep abreast of new satellite technologies such as XM and SIRIUS satellite transmissions and OnStar emergency road service, which undoubtedly will play a role in the future of AMBER Alert communications.



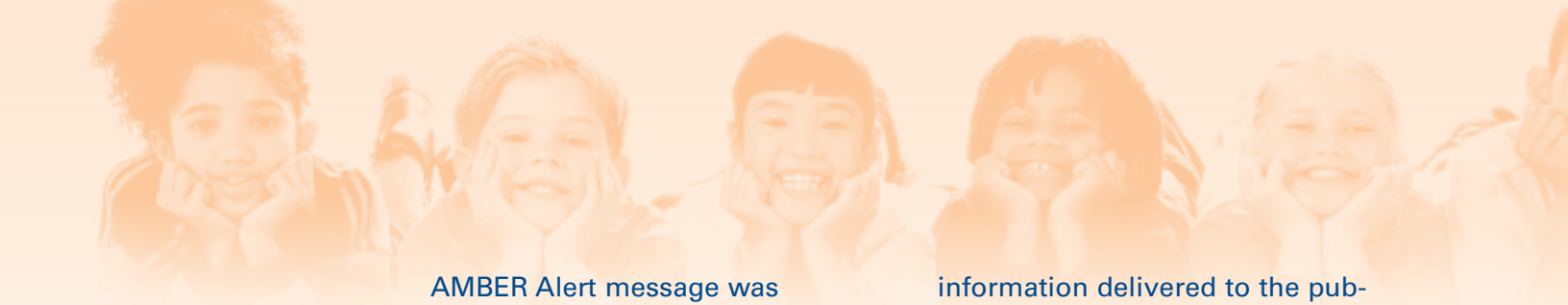
- ◆ Start every media briefing with an opening statement by an appropriate law enforcement official followed by a question-and-answer session (if previously agreed to by officials).
- ◆ Provide additional information about the victim(s) and/or suspect(s) along with photographs and home videos if available, as approved by command officials, to enhance the media's coverage of the incident.
- ◆ Enlist the aid of media technical personnel if copies of videotapes or audiotapes and live feeds are necessary (if family members and/or the commander in charge of the investigation have granted approval for their use).
- ◆ Use a digital camera and have the capacity to transmit digital photos to the media if necessary.
- ◆ Take and disseminate photographs of selected areas of crime scenes to aid in identification, if appropriate. Such photos should be disseminated only with command officials' approval.
- ◆ Plan for worst-case scenarios by anticipating both the types of questions that are likely to arise in such a scenario and the agency's response.

Ensuring the Message Has Been Received

During the public warning phase, AMBER Alerts are generally disseminated through text messaging, which means the request for activation and the ensuing public warning messages are most often in written form. Written messages are found on U.S. Department of Transportation veritable message signs as well as on television broadcasts, where a verbal Alert announcement is often accompanied or followed by a written text message "crawling" across the top or bottom of the television screen. All messages are generated from a law enforcement agency.

A PIO whose responsibilities include requesting the media to activate an AMBER Alert is equally responsible for ensuring that the message has been understood and properly carried out. A PIO who does not have this responsibility should nevertheless verify, on behalf of his or her agency, that the request for activation has been made.

The PIO should not assume an AMBER Alert message has been received just because it was sent by traditional means such as fax or e-mail. The PIO should do the following to verify that the



AMBER Alert message was received:

- ◆ Telephone the appropriate broadcast media representative for confirmation.
- ◆ Follow up with an e-mail or text message, where available.

Finally, the PIO should be prepared! An AMBER Alert can generate an immediate demand for information from all types of media, both local and national, and rapid updates of accurate information are critical. This sudden demand can be overwhelming, especially for a small agency.

Controlling the Spread of Rumors

Rumors, false or misleading information, and innuendoes frequently emerge during any law enforcement incident or investigation, and AMBER Alert warnings are no exception. Because journalists will seek additional information on their own from a victim's family members, friends, and witnesses, rumors can develop quickly. Monitoring rumors and staying informed about all aspects of the agency's investigation are vital for the PIO. Fortunately, the PIO has the distinct advantage of being in a strategic position to control the

information delivered to the public and thus to help counter potential problems early.

The PIO should do the following:

- ◆ Monitor all media coverage of an AMBER Alert incident, including special Alert announcements, continuing news media coverage, television and radio talk shows, and Web sites maintained by conventional and non-conventional media.
- ◆ Recognize that the media are participating voluntarily in an AMBER Alert and do not wish to be viewed as an extension of a law enforcement action. The media respect law enforcement agencies much more when those agencies recognize that the media's primary responsibility is to inform the public independently.
- ◆ Be aware that once an AMBER Alert has been activated, the story will be pursued aggressively. This means the "angle" of the story may change in unpredictable ways. For example, the AMBER Alert process may be analyzed, the criminal investigation may be scrutinized, and the public's response may be evaluated—all in the public domain, with little or no direction from law enforcement.



- ◆ Collect as much information as possible about any circulating rumors and be vigilant in negating any incorrect or misleading reports that arise. The PIO should address incorrect information directly by contacting the appropriate news media outlet or by issuing a special agencywide news announcement that specifies the correct information to be conveyed to the public.
- ◆ Make no attempt to seize media videotapes or audiotapes (whether broadcast or outtakes), notes, photographs, or other material that is owned by or in the possession of the media. Frequently, a simple request for a copy of the material will be honored by the media.

Finally, as a representative of law enforcement, the PIO should be aware that some information uncovered by the media may need to be investigated.

The PIO's Role in the Deactivation Phase


Because most AMBER Alerts will transition to full-blown criminal investigations, the incident commander should inform the PIO when the AMBER Alert phase has concluded and the investigatory phase has begun. The role of the

PIO in an AMBER Alert does not end when the public warning has been deactivated. Rather, the PIO's job enters a new phase, and the PIO must be prepared to serve in this mode. In particular, the PIO will have to abide by agency policies and legal restrictions that govern information dissemination. Disclosures that are permitted during an AMBER Alert may not be allowable once the incident has transitioned from public warning to criminal investigation.

Deactivation of an AMBER Alert will likely lead to additional responsibilities for the PIO. For example, the PIO may be called on to advise and even coach a victim's family members, who may be participating in media interviews for the first time in their lives. The PIO also may need to contact agencies that provide counseling to work with a victim's family members and friends. These duties can consume much of the PIO's time and energy; therefore, the agency chief should monitor the situation carefully and consider designating a liaison to work directly with the family, if necessary.

Once the public warning phase has ended, the PIO should do the following:

- ◆ Inform the news media immediately that the AMBER Alert incident has transitioned to a criminal investigation and explain why information sought



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by the media will now be restricted. (Knowledge of the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act and state statutes on public records is essential.)

- ◆ Be aware of the information contained in public documents such as unsealed arrest warrants, search warrants, incident reports, and affidavits, and be prepared to respond to any questions that may arise as a result of such disclosure.
- ◆ Be prepared to help victims' families by coaching them on the most effective ways to deal with media attention and the pros and cons of being interviewed by the media. Tell families specifically what information they should and should not mention, in accordance with the advice of investigators and prosecutors working on the case.
- ◆ In rural areas where local radio stations are in "night broadcast mode," PIOs should follow the procedure for sending an EAS alert to ensure that updated information can be broadcast.

Thanking AMBER Alert Participants

After the AMBER Alert phase is over, the PIO should acknowledge, on behalf of the agency and CEO, the contributions of all those who were involved, including broadcasters, local businesses, government agencies, and law enforcement agencies that supported the effort with additional manpower and other resources. Specifically, the PIO should do the following:

- ◆ Acknowledge and thank all media, including nontraditional outlets such as newspapers, cell phone providers, and co-owned Web-based services, for their assistance in publicizing the AMBER Alert.
- ◆ Acknowledge and thank other organizations that volunteered time and services on behalf of the missing child (e.g., utility companies, taxicab companies, various nonprofit organizations, and other groups and businesses).
- ◆ Acknowledge and thank all law enforcement agencies (federal, state, and local) that participated in both the search and investigative phases of the incident.



A Final Word

AMBER Alert programs nationwide may differ in their policies relating to the person tasked to request activation of an Alert, the criteria that dictate when an Alert is to be activated, and the person who decides when an Alert is to be deactivated. However, the PIO's role—to set the overall tone during an Alert and to control the flow of information based on legal restrictions and agency policies already in place—should not vary.

Similarly, law enforcement agencies are not the same in size, structure, or composition. Larger agencies usually have a PIO in place to keep the public informed. Smaller agencies, on the other hand, often lack personnel and/or resources to hire a dedicated PIO and therefore must rely on the temporary appointment of a line or supervisory officer to manage this task. As a result, the PIO's role can range from direct, hands-on responsibility in the decision to activate an Alert to little or no immediate involvement.

In all agencies, the PIO should not be encumbered during an AMBER Alert incident with responsibilities other than the dissemination of information to the public that aids in the recovery of an abducted child. This in turn will allow key investigative personnel to focus exclusively on their goals of safely recovering the missing child and

investigating the circumstances of the disappearance.

Ultimately, the PIO's role in an AMBER Alert is fluid. The PIO's functions can change with each new set of circumstances. Above all, the PIO must remember that once an AMBER Alert has been issued, it is public information and cannot be taken back. Also, the Alert does not end until proper deactivation procedures have been completed.

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Contributors

This guide was prepared with the assistance of practitioners in the law enforcement field who provide information to the public about missing children's issues and the National Information Officers Association, a voluntary professional organization located in Knoxville, Tennessee. The following individuals also helped to prepare this guide:

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

For more information about the AMBER Alert program, including training, technical assistance, and laws, visit the U.S. Department of Justice Web site at:

www.AMBERALERT.gov

To report an emergency situation or to provide information about a missing or exploited child, call 911 to notify your local police, or call

800-THE-LOST (800-843-5678)

To report information about child pornography, child molestation, child prostitution, and the online enticement of children, log on to the CyberTipline at:

www.cybertipline.com

For more information on missing and exploited children, visit the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children (NCMEC) at:

www.missingkids.com

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